

Early Fourth of July Celebrations

By EDITH WEBBER

The following is from the script of a radio program aired from Des Moines on July 4, 1946 by Mrs. Edith Webber. She introduced the program by saying, "I spent some time last week going through some books and old periodicals to find accounts of early Fourth of July celebrations in Iowa, when the state was still a territory and soon after it became a state." The program continued:

In 1839, the first celebration of Independence Day was held in Iowa City. On the morning of the auspicious day, the stars and stripes were unfurled to the breeze by attaching the flag-staff to the top of a tall young oak tree that had been stripped of its branches. It was from this unique pole on Capitol Square that the United States flag waved for the first time. A cavalcade of pioneer settlers, about 100, arrived with the dinner which had been prepared at the Indian trading house four miles down the river and, after dinner, a program of toasts and speeches was carried through with Colonel Thomas Cox presiding. The Declaration of Independence was read by John Frierson from the rostrum which consisted of the wagon that was used in bringing the dinner up from the trading house. In the back part of the wagon was a barrel of Cincinnati whiskey and a tin cup.

With one foot elevated upon the barrel of whiskey the orator held forth—this is the description given of him. "A man with a sandy complexion, tall square raw boned, hard-featured stoop-shouldered, knock-kneed and pigeon toe, but he made a speech of surpassing eloquence."

The only living witness of the celebration which took place 107 years ago is a massive oak tree.

The early pioneer celebrated few holidays. The Fourth of July was the one most apt to be celebrated, but much of the celebration was given over to long speeches. It did furnish the hardworking pioneers an opportunity at least once a year, to come together and maintain some semblance of social life. The celebration, of course, was accompanied by the inevitable fire cracker. Now and then, anvils from the neighborhood smithies were charged with powder and fired off either one by one or in volleys, sometimes without accident or casualty.

On July Fourth in 1839, the birthday of the Territory of

Iowa and the 62nd anniversary of the independency of the nation was celebrated with patriotic ceremonies at Fort Madison. Old Chief Black Hawk participated and made a speech. He said, "A few winters ago I was fighting against you, I did wrong perhaps but that is past, it is buried."

Temperance prevailed, even in Dubuque the immoral practice of drinking spirits to excess was unknown. The *Iowa News* carried an essay entitled "Avoid contradicting your husband in describing the Fourth of July Celebrations. Occupy yourself only with household affairs: never take upon yourself to be acensor of your husband's morals; command his attention by being always attentive to him; never exact anything and you will receive much; appear always flattered by the little he does for you which will incite him to perform more; all men are vain—never wound this vanity; choose well your female friends, have but few; cherish neatness without luxury and pleasure without excess; dress with taste and particularly with modesty; vary the fashion of your dress especially with reference to colors, such things may appear trifling but they are of more importance than is imagined."

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It is claimed that during the summer of 1837, E. W. Winfield caught a catfish in the Mississippi weighing 170 pounds. Wild game was abundant and people spent much time hunting and fishing. Venison could often be purchased for two or three cents a pound. Wild turkeys sold all the way from 25-50 cents and prairie chickens were so plentiful that hunters usually gave them away. Newspaper editors described Iowa as a land of promise, a region flowing with milk and honey. In 1860 Bedford the county seat of Taylor County was a town of nearly 500 people—Bedford had six general stores, a drug store, a hardware store, a tin shop, one hotel, one church, a school house, a weekly newspaper, a sawmill and two steam grist-mills. A crippled blacksmith worked all day at his forge while a trained dog pumped the bellows by means of a tread-wheel contrivance. A stage coach connected Bedford with Quincy, Illinois and with St. Joseph, Missouri. The arrival of the stage coach was an event which brought many of the adults in town to the post office, there to wait impatiently while the postmaster sorted out the mail. In this grow-

ing town when the town fathers planned a celebration of the Glorious Fourth, there was much excitement, particularly when it was learned that the Bedford Sax Horn Band, organized scarcely two weeks earlier by a German barber who had learned to play in the Fatherland, was slated to head the procession and to furnish music throughout the day.

Couriers on horseback carried the news of the proposed celebration throughout the county. At an early hour on the morning of July Fourth 1860, roads leading from sections of the country to Bedford were lined with wagons and horses. Young men rode spirited mounts, boys were on trusted nags, fathers were dressed in homespun and mothers and daughters in their best calico. Soon the dusty streets of the little town were thronged to their utmost capacity by a good natured pleasure-seeking crowd. In a short time, three local doctors acting as marshals of the day, formed the crowd into a procession on Main Street, headed by a Sax band and a color bearer followed by veterans of the War of 1812 and the Mexican war. Sabbath school children followed ladies and their attendants and in the rear, carriages and wagons—all moved in good order to the grove northeast of town where preparation had been made for the occasion. After the orations of the day the entire company found places around a table 500 feet long, loaded with all the food the pioneer could provide. After dinner a flag made by Bedford ladies was presented to Clayton township for having the largest delegation present. The climax of the festivities occurred with the cutting of the cake. W. F. Fuller had made a huge cake at the cost of \$25.00. This cake was four feet high and among other adornments had 56 flags around the base, each flag bearing the name of a signer of the Declaration of Independence. This huge cake was large enough to furnish every one present with a small piece. It was estimated that 2500 people took part in this Fourth of July celebration.

Among the unattractive features of life in early Iowa, particularly in the southern and eastern parts of the State was the prevalence of rattle-snakes. These reptiles would not infrequently find their way into a settler's cabin and occasionally even into his bed. An incident is related of a rattlesnake which, apparently about to attack a sleeping settler, was

seized and killed by his dog though not before the faithful dog was bitten. On another occasion, a traveller who was passing through southeastern Iowa stopped one night at a cabin where lived two lonesome and disconsolate old bachelors. The guest was provided with supper but the bachelors refrained from eating. In the course of the afternoon they had killed more than 200 snakes and the thought of the squirming creatures had spoiled their appetites. In Madison County, snakes were particularly numerous. They frequented the rock ledges along the streams and there multiplied rapidly. Men wore leather leggings as a protection against them while women were terrified by their incessant rattling. One settler reported coming upon more than 30 snakes coiled up in the form of a ball. At another time, two men killed 90 in an hour and a half. One man declared he had enough rattlesnakes on his farm to fence it. While relatively few people were actually bitten by rattlesnakes, they were a constant menace. Boys who went barefoot in warm weather were in the greatest danger and had to be always on the alert. They could jump farther at the sound of a rattle than under any other circumstances. A plentiful supply of whiskey was thought to be the only cure for snake bite. It's no wonder that the settlers got to gether and thought about some plan for exterminating snakes.

At a public meeting sometime in the spring of 1848, a general snake hunt was proposed. To increase the interest in the enterprise it was decided to divide the settlers into two groups and arrange for a snake killing contest. All those who lived north of Middle River constituted one company, while the settlers on the south of the river organized another company. William Combs was captain of one group, Ephriam Bilderback of th other. To lend zest to the hunt, each participant was to pledge a certain amount of corn as a sort of entrance fee. The whole stake to be awarded to the victorious company. The only regulations of the hunt were to go forth and kill as many snakes possible. Each company was to keep within its own territory and all rattles were to be preserved as proof of the number of snakes killed. The Fourth of July was fixed as the date for the official count and so the

great snake hunt was launched. Special efforts were made to get the rattlers before they left their dens in the spring, for it was the habit of rattlesnakes to hibernate in the rocky bluffs along the streams for the winter. When warm weather began in April or May, they came out on the sunny ledges in the middle of the day and crawled back into their dens at night. As summer advanced they left their winter habitation and scattered out into the brush.

The settlers were very busy every spring preparing the ground and planning their crops, but every noon on every warm day some one would go down to the snake dens to see if any of the reptiles were lying around in the sun. Usually some were caught. Of course the hunters were on the watch for snakes all the time, but on Sundays when their regular duties were not so pressing, they really worked at snake killing in earnest. It was customary to go armed with a club and when watching the dens, a stick with a wire hook in the end was used to pull snakes out of holes and from under rocks.

The Fourth of July, 1848, was a gala day in Madison County. All the snake hunters with their families gathered at Guye's Grove for the first celebration of Independence Day in that community. An ox was barbecued for the occasion and Lysander W. Babbitt, candidate for the office of State Representative, made a speech. The event, however, that attracted the greatest attention was the snake count. A joint committee of two from each company was selected to count the rattles. Alfred D. Jones, a newcomer in the county, was appointed to act as clerk. The snake hunters presented their collections of rattles in bags, old pockets and stockings. When the count was completed it was found that nearly 4,000 snakes had lost their lives. The north company won the contest, but the corn prize was never collected. Some say that the hunters were determined to have the corn ground at the mill and give the meal to a poor widow. Some say that the committee quarrelled while under the influence of too much snakebite remedy. At the barbecue this toast was offered to "the Captain and company of the Victorious Snaking Party. Their names will be handed down to future generations of Madison County for their snakish bravery."

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